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Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

ESSAYS BY 40 WORKING ARTISTS



JULIE HEFFERNAN



Julie Heffernan
Self-Portrait as Big World
68"x70"
Oil on canvas
2008
Courtesy of the artist and
P.P.O.W. Gallery

I LEFT HOME AT 18 on the dot with nary a trust fund to my name, so I needed to learn early on how to survive with no help from parents or otherwise. My family is Catholic working-class that got its art from redeeming Blue Chip Stamps, and had one framed print of Jesus as the Sacred Heart on our living room wall. I worked my way through college at UCSC and took out loans to go to graduate school at Yale; after that I had to find ways pretty quickly to pay the rent, pay off those loans and support a painting life. I learned to be efficient. Speed and efficiency are my sports: if I can cook a square meal in a half hour rather than an hour, or drive to State College, PA, in four hours instead of the usual six, then I have an extra two-and-a-half hours to spend dreaming on my couch in the studio. I might have been an efficiency expert in another life.

My first jobs after grad school were working as a hack portrait painter, and for an interior decorator doing odd jobs (both of which I found through the yellow pages). The goal was to work three days a week making \$200/day (this was in the 1980s); that way I could pay my rent and paint four days a week. No days off. I learned how to paint a portrait in about two hours, which meant on a good week I could think of myself as making \$100/hour. Seemed like a good wage at the time.

After a year of that I decided enough was enough and applied for a Fulbright, to what was at the time West Berlin. I botched the application (I actually applied to the wrong institution), but

got the grant anyway, and in Berlin I had the time and space to indulge myself with 15-hour painting sessions in a dank hole of an apartment I sublet from a Goth guy who had blacked-out all the windows and kept fish in the toilet. There was only a wood-burning stove to heat the apartment, so my boyfriend and I would go out in a friend's car and scavenge wood from the streets. I got frostbite that winter.

When I got back from Berlin I got married to that boyfriend, then started in again with the decorative painting and learned some techniques that definitely helped me in my own work, so the hack work was not for naught. But after a few years of working atop high ladders and dangling from scaffolds, I decided I didn't want to be doing that kind of work when I turned 50, so I applied for a teaching job: a two-year position at Indiana University, Bloomington. I got the job, found out I loved teaching, and then got pregnant while running the Florence Drawing Program (pregnant by accident – it was Italy after all). Not wanting to ruin my just-budding career with a child, I was distraught to say the least; but I did some soul-searching and figured out I could do this – what at the time seemed crazy – thing, if I mustered all my resources.

That meant switching to a tenure-track job (at Penn State), finding a babysitting co-op in Brooklyn, where we lived, bringing one of my students from PA to live with us in our Brooklyn basement (with no toilet or running water) as an au pair girl (apparently it was worth it to be in NYC), and turning that same basement into a studio. We had bought a wreck of a house in 1992 which was, unbeknownst to us, the bottom of the housing market. (This was the biggest stroke of pure luck I can claim in my life.) I had just gotten an NEA and my husband Jonathan a full-time teaching job at Hunter College, and we had saved enough for a down payment, so we got our dilapidated house. I learned demolition and sheet rocking, and Jonathan learned to do electrical work, so we were able to renovate our house pretty much by ourselves, with the help of one overweight ex-con we met on the street.

The first chapters of making a painting life were very hard, and I had many ups and downs over the course of it (haven't we all?), some of which were accompanied by a poisonous fear of failure taking various forms – anxiety attacks, crying jags, like

that – but I learned how to knit myself back together, each time learning something deeper about myself and about making art that is true to oneself, and about the importance of not running after false, soul-deadening goals like coolness or the latest fad.

I've also had a lot of help in forms I might not have anticipated. My husband is a theater critic and has helped me immeasurably to improve my work and hone my ideas more closely. He has an uncanny way of pointing out a problem area in a painting, one I couldn't even see, and then giving me ideas for solving it, which I never use but which help me to see things from a different perspective. My kids also give me feedback despite themselves, by a process I call "inadvertent critique:" they come down to talk to me in the studio and, by either unconsciously gazing at the painting while chatting with me or ignoring it completely, I can tell whether the painting is too painful to look at or not. I think of unfinished paintings as wounded creatures that we avert our eyes from out of compassion or sheer avoidance of pain. If the kids look, it means the painting has composed itself.

And I've been in several artist groups where we take turns having studio visits and give each other unstinting critiques, with a real commitment to honesty – something hard to come by if not expressly requested. I've learned from teaching that we almost have to pay to get truly honest critiques.

I've been teaching at Montclair State University for 14 years and am now an Associate Professor. People ask me why I continue to teach now that I don't need to economically any more. The question always reminds me that teaching is a great boon because it forces us to come out of ourselves, and be constantly reminded, as we watch students go through the awkwardness and torture of those early jabs at self-expression, about the mini-miracle of self-transformation that art engenders (if we properly learn from its lessons). But, on a practical level, I'm also always aware that painting sales could dry up tomorrow if the economy really tanked or all the hedge fund guys were sent to hell in the Rapture; so, as the child of Depression-era parents, I keep my day job even after all these years.

I have a good relationship with my dealers, largely because I provide them with a lot of work and don't call them all the time. I don't want them to keep in constant contact with me because I'd prefer them to be in constant contact with curators

and collectors. I have learned over time that, at least in my case, when work doesn't do anything – get reviewed, get curated into shows or get sold – it's most likely the fault of the work, not the dealer. This isn't always true, but it's a good mantra to have because we really only have control over our work, not the art world.

I still work in that dank basement I renovated 19 years ago. I have two couches, each facing a painting wall. I laze on them, surround myself with tea and nuts like a Roman, and beam myself into whatever painting world I am currently in the midst of. If I'm lucky, the painting will play me and I rumba with it. I let it have the lead, and I follow madly, careering after it for as long as it lets me. ☺